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Who Helps the Degraded Housewife?

Comments on Vladimir Putin's Demographic Speech

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ABSTRACT This article analyses the new demographic programme that was announced by the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, in 2006. The main goal of this programme is to encourage fertility, especially the birth of a second child. New benefits should elevate the status of women taking maternity leave, who might otherwise suffer from discrimination in the family. The housewife is considered to be dependent and 'degraded'. We argue that this demographic politics recalls continuity with soviet gender politics centred on the support of wage-earning working mothers. The programme provokes different critiques. Liberal critics argue that the programme is a populist one and it may have undesired economic and social consequences. Conservative critics want to encourage more traditional 'woman' and 'family' roles in society. Feminist critics argue that this politics would reinforce both the inferior position of women on the labour market and gender imbalances on the symbolic level.

KEY WORDS demographic programme ♦ family ♦ gender contract ♦ gender politics ♦ maternal capital ♦ Russia

In his annual address to the nation in May 2006, Russian president Vladimir Putin made several new suggestions concerning family and childcare policy. Later that year, his proposals were approved by the Duma and received legal status. This is the first time that post-socialist gender politics have been so clearly outlined in Russia. While, in the mid-1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev had envisioned the possibility of women returning to their traditional roles as a means to lighten their double burden, Putin strongly advocated both wage-work and state support for Russian mothers. What rhetorical and political strategies explain this interesting move? What gender ideology lies behind them? Putin's speech was discussed in the Russian and international press, both for its emphasis on foreign policy and for its – more unexpected – attention to demographic issues, upon which we focus in this article.

APPEAL TO INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE

First, the skilful rhetoric of the speech deserves mention. Putin referred to several cultural figures in order to legitimate and symbolically justify his programme. The names he invoked are not arbitrary and we should look at their background and the rhetorical context in order to grasp their meanings. In the first minutes, Putin cited a long quotation from US president Roosevelt's 1934 speech, in which Roosevelt described the Great National Programme known as the New Deal. Roosevelt was placed within the context of Russia's fight against the dishonest earnings of the so-called oligarchs and aligned with Putin's idea of social justice fostered by the state, as well as with the role of the state in curbing the devastations of wild capitalism. Putin openly stated that he followed the same lines of thinking and policy-making.

The writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn is a moral authority famous for his anti-Soviet dissent and strong liberal conservatism. The Russian president referred to Solzhenitsyn's words about 'preservation of the nation' in a broad sense, linking it to one of the most important problems in contemporary Russia: the demographic problem. Dmitrii Likhachev, the first Honorable Citizen of St Petersburg, native city of the president, is known as a liberal nationalist for whom the Russian intelligentsia and its focus on the cultural premises of Russian civilization were of major importance. Likhachev's liberal patriotism is revealed in the quotation cited by Putin: 'love for one's country starts from love for one's family'. Traditional family values, love of the home and hearth: this is the position with which the president identified. Ivan Ilyin, a fourth figure mentioned in the address, was a conservative Russian philosopher (1882–1954) who emigrated from Soviet Russia in 1922. Ilyin claimed that 'soldier' is an honourable title, as 'it represents the whole Russian national identity, the Russian state's will, might, and honour'.

All of the Russian historical figures quoted in the speech were critics of the Soviet system. The speech thus appealed to Putin's main political allies, as well as to his probable opponents on the liberal right. Putin positioned himself as an adherent of the Russian traditions of a strong state, traditional patriotic values and gender polarization, and distanced himself from the Soviet past. But this was just a framework. As we discuss, the continuity with Soviet gender policies was obviously, though not openly, recalled.

INTRODUCING MATERNAL CAPITAL

Putin's 2006 address first noted how Russia's worrisome demographic development – 'the most acute problem facing our country today' – is affected by three processes: mortality, migration and fertility. Road safety should be improved, and skilled migrants encouraged to immigrate. He also mentioned improving the general quality of life and supporting maternal care centres.

But the focus of his suggested demographic programme is on childcare policies encouraging fertility, and especially the birth of a second child. Monthly childcare benefits for children under 18 months are to be raised to 1500 rubles (just under €50) for the first child, and 3000 rubles (just under €100) for the second. Wage-earning mothers will receive at least 40 percent of their wages (with an upper threshold) until the child reaches 18 months. This maternal subsidy will be paid from the state budget. The huge numbers of abandoned children, it was argued, will be reduced by support for foster parenting.

Finally, Putin proposed a new form of benefit: the 'basic maternal capital'. This capital consists of a larger sum, which the mother is to receive when her second child turns three, and which should be invested in loans, housing, the mother's pension, or education for the child. The total amount of maternal capital for a mother of two children will be 250,000 rubles, and indexed annually for inflation. This benefit will elevate the status of a woman taking maternity leave, who might otherwise suffer from discrimination in the family. Funds from the maternal capital can only be spent on the state-defined targets mentioned above. In Putin's view, the maternal capital could thus function as a mother's wealth, which the state provides a woman as a mother when she has a second child, compensating for the loss of career momentum.

Political commentators judged the demographic theme as a brilliant way of appropriating one of the Communists' favourite topics. Communists and harsh nationalists have for a decade deplored what is called 'the ongoing genocide of the Russian population', and often blamed it on western influence, be it in the form of sexual permissiveness or imported drugs. Putin's rhetoric was notably free of any inflammatory, xenophobic rhetoric. Instead,

it was clearly informed by the politically liberal Russian demographers, as well as neoinstitutionalists, who advocate a pragmatic and evidence-based approach to Russia's population problems (Vishnevskii, 2006a).

Putin's approach was monetaristic and pragmatic, both in analysis and policy formation. He asked:

What stops young families, women, from making such a decision today, especially when we're talking of having a second or third child? The answers are well known. They include low income, inadequate housing conditions, doubts as to their own ability to ensure the child a decent level of healthcare and education, and – let's be honest – sometimes doubts as to whether they will even be able to feed the child.

Thus, the problems were presented as mainly economic, and the solution, more money from the state:

A programme to encourage childbirth should include a whole series of administrative, financial and social support measures for young families. All of these measures are equally important, but nothing will bring results unless the necessary material support is provided.

A few sentences devoted to family values appeared only at the end of the speech. The recipient of the increased benefits is clearly the woman as mother. 'Young families' were mentioned occasionally, and often as synonymous with women and mothers:

I propose measures to support young families and support women who decide to give birth and raise children. Our aim should be at the least to encourage families to have a second child.

The words 'men' or 'fathers' were glaringly absent from this speech, as was any reference to grandparents or other relatives, who still play an important role in Russian childcare arrangements. The indirect support of fatherhood was inferred only in the first part of the address, concerning the role of the military. There Putin advocated revising several legal conditions enabling a suspension of obligatory military service, including a delay of recruitment for conscripts whose wives are pregnant.

At least Putin's speech cannot be blamed for heterosexual normativity. While he could have deplored the rising numbers of unwed parents, divorcees and single mothers, he did not. Nothing indicates that his understanding of 'families' excludes single-parent families or enlarged households. Furthermore, Putin was especially critical of the economic dependence of mothers in nuclear families:

I think that the state has a duty to help women who have given birth to a second child and end up out of the workplace for a long time, losing their skills. I think that, unfortunately, women in this situation often end up in a

dependent and frankly even degraded position within the family. We should not be shy about discussing these issues openly and we must do so if we want to resolve these problems.

We see here how Putin's speech aimed at strengthening the legacy of the Soviet family, which was centred around the civic entitlement of wage-earning mothers. The Soviet gender contract, which took root in the 1930s, required women to become both wage-earners and mothers, returning these favours with equal rights (or lack of rights) for all citizens and with female-friendly family policies. In terms of policy, this represented a kind of state feminism, while any independent feminist movement was forbidden in the Soviet Union.

The practices of working mothers have dominated in post-socialist Russia, although the range of gender contracts has come to include more diverse arrangements, notably the bourgeois housewife and male breadwinner (Temkina and Rotkirch, 1997). That Putin labelled the image of women favoured by a section of the business elite as not only dependent, but 'degraded', is an interesting move. We are very far from the *pere-stroika* years of the 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev wished women to return to their traditional roles, and the dominating ideology supported male breadwinners.

Neither did Putin reproduce the strong symbolic elevation of women as mothers typical of the Soviet gender order. For instance, the address did not refer directly to specific female values and inborn psychological skills. It did so only implicitly by not mentioning fathers as caregivers.

Few other politicians of this level, anywhere in the world, have so strongly endorsed women's economic independence. The same approach can be found among the socialist classics such as Friedrich Engels, August Bebel and notably the Russian Alexandra Kollontay, who regarded state support to women as mothers as the main tool of family policy.

LIBERAL, CONSERVATIVE AND FEMINIST CRITIQUES

The Russian media commented extensively on the president's 2006 annual address. The discussion started immediately following the speech. No public hearings or debates had preceded the demographic programme formulated in the address, which was adopted without major change in 2007. Most politicians were unanimous in their approval of the measures providing family and maternity support. Thus, for example, St Petersburg governor, Valentina Matvienko, acknowledged the vital importance of the demographic problem as an actual threat to national security (Reut, 2006).

By contrast, critically oriented journalists have emphasized the general climate of public distrust towards national projects. Lay people have expressed disbelief as to whether the programme could be fulfilled. Local

administrations are predicted to be the main culprit in the anticipated failure of the programme. They are perceived as being inherently inclined or well positioned to steal the maternal benefit money or block the programme in bureaucratic red-tape. In any case, many ordinary people believe the money will not reach its intended recipients.

Russian experts are more divided in their opinions. Most academics are sceptical, and claim that the monetary measures will not affect the demographic situation. We may identify three partially overlapping critical positions: those of the liberals, feminists and conservatives. The liberals represent the strongest and most visible sectors of public opinion critical of the authoritarian trend in Russian politics. This umbrella category includes many different positions and is also referred to as the shared democratic platform. The liberals are usually liberal both with regard to values and through their support for efficient monetary policies. They are opposed to the other main critical group, the conservatives, who promote family and nationalistic values and are often closely allied to the Russian Orthodox Church. We see the feminists as a third, separate line, because both liberal and conservative critiques often support traditional family arrangements, for instance regarding fatherhood.

A typical example of the liberal critique is that expressed by the director of the Independent Institute of Social Politics, Dr Tatiana Maleva. She argues that if women stay at home as mothers and housewives, the problem of labour resources, which is already acute, will intensify (Reut, 2006). The budget expenses for maternal capital and child subsidies will result in the growth of inflation. The sum of maternal capital proposed by the president is not sufficient to be a real stimulus for a growth in birthrate, she points out; it equals the current price of just five square metres of real estate in Moscow (Zheleznova and Yusopova, 2006).

The liberally oriented demographers and sociologists believe that Putin's programme is not sufficient to stimulate the birthrate, though it could further encourage people to have a second child if one has been planned already (Vishnevskii, 2006b). Additionally, only the poorer strata of the population are likely to be motivated by the small monetary gains offered in the programme. The suggested measures will stimulate only those ethno-cultural groups that maintain traditions of multiple-children families (which in Russia means parities of three and more) and where the issues of poverty are most acute (Bessarabova and Yusopova, 2006). For the middle class, the maternal capital proposed is too small a sum and cannot compensate for the economic losses incurred by the household if one of the parents stops working, albeit temporarily. Thus the middle class does not stand to benefit, as their earnings are higher and a career is meaningful. Mothers risk jeopardizing their upward mobility and sacrificing their careers if they stay for two to three years on maternity leave. The costs of quality childcare and education are very high in contemporary Russia, the sociologists fur-

ther note, and the expenses far exceed the amounts of child subsidies outlined by the president.

Thus, the general conclusion among Russian liberals is that the family programme rhetoric is a populist one and may have undesired economic and social consequences.

The Russian conservatives express other concerns: they would like the state to support the 'natural role' of women as mothers even more extensively. Sergei Mironov, the chairman of the upper chamber of the parliament and the leader of the party Fair Russia, has proposed the idea of a 'family salary' promoting housewifery, which is in his opinion still undeveloped in Russia. It would provide women on maternity leave with regular support from the state, rather than the one-off payment envisioned in Putin's concept of maternal capital. Additionally, Mironov expressed hope that the family salary would strengthen the prestige of the father as the breadwinner of the family (Mironov, 2006).

The Orthodox Church has focused on the moral aspect of the problem, and demanded reinforcement of so-called spiritual and family values (which the conservative critic Mironov does also). Church publications deplore the general decline of moral values in connection with gender and childbearing in the family. However, the Church has not taken a very active stance in this debate and generally supports the president's policies.

The third line of critique is that of feminists and women's movement activists. They partly agree with the liberal position but also express their own concerns. As the programme is too monetarist, it is predicted to be insufficient overall. Monetary policies deflect attention from such urgent issues as the reform of maternal healthcare, where institutional trust is very low, or educational reforms. Feminists have also criticized the proposed programme for its shallow understanding of family types and arrangements and a focus on a certain type of family. Family benefits have to be more diversified; the programme's focus on families with two children is not justified, they claim. Social policy should also address other types of families, such as single-parent households and families with more than two children. This argument has been put forth, for example, by Deputy Ekaterina Lakhova, representing the political movement Women of Russia (Reut, 2006).

Feminists also deplore the traditional role assigned to fathers in Putin's speech, which did not present any understanding of shared parenthood. Putin's policies are seen to be very similar to the Soviet policies of assistance and support for the working mother as a natural caregiver and useful economic resource. These policies would strengthen the inferior positions of women on the labour market and reproduce gender polarization and gender imbalances on the symbolic level. Feminists are also critical of the fact that the issue of flexible employment schemes that could improve the balance between wage-work and family life was not even mentioned (Gapova, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

The family policies proposed in Putin's 2006 address increased childcare benefits and introduced the new concept of maternal capital as support for mothers having two children. These policies present themselves as emphatically women-friendly. We consider that the address and following policies prove that the Russian president has appropriated notions of gender and parenthood that were typical of the Soviet period. In its entirety, the address included two complementary gender issues: the 'female' demographic problem and the 'male' reform of the military service. Femininity was defined in terms of the wage-working mother supported by the state on a symbolic level, and receiving small monetary benefits on an economic level. This suggests that the balance of work and family is exclusively a woman's issue. This type of polarized gender consciousness, with strict division into feminine and masculine spheres, appears to be typical of the Russian administration today.

If US president George W. Bush is a compassionate conservative, Putin is a pragmatic conservative. Putin is conservative with regard to the Soviet social policy legacy, in which the state presents itself as a mother's best friend. He is pragmatic in paying more attention to real-life problems and in discarding the praise of motherhood familiar from Soviet ideology.

We basically endorse the feminist line of critique. We agree that the economic part of the programme will not achieve its goal; it cannot stimulate the birthrate as it claims, in spite of its populist rhetoric of pragmatism ('effective measures'; 'duty of the state towards women'; 'we need to do something useful and necessary that will reap the gratitude of millions of mothers', 'young families' and 'all the people of this country').

We believe that priority should be given to policies fostering the growth of qualities and qualifications of parents, gender-equal parenthood, improvement of childcare, family-friendly working conditions and maternity-care systems.

The symbolic appeal of the new presidential programme of fertility growth should not be underestimated, however. Russian women's citizenship has once again been defined in terms of the working-mother contract. There is no longer any discussion of sending women 'back home'. Instead, there is some recognition of the dilemma of child-rearing for educated women in contemporary Russia (to stay at home and quit work, or to prefer career over children), and of the forms of discrimination experienced by economically dependent housewives in their families. The state is viewed as the agent that should fight against family patriarchy. Even if parenthood is still defined in terms of motherhood only, gender issues are once more visibly at the centre of Russian national politics.

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